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CLAUSEWITZ ON THE RAPPAHANNOCK
FOG AND FRICTION AT
THE BATTLE OF FREDERICKSBURG

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CLAUSEWITZ ON THE RAPPAHANNOCK
FOG AND FRICTION AT THE BATTLE OF FREDERICKSBURG

Carl von Clausewitz completed his initial, unrevised draft of *On War* more than thirty years before the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter His writings, unlike those of his Swiss contemporary, Antoine-Henri Jomini, had not become a part of American military curriculum by the middle of the 19th century, and most Civil War commanders probably were unfamiliar with his work Moreover, the conflict in which those commanders were engaged proved to be qualitatively and quantitatively different -- in scale, in violence, in technology, in resultant changes in tactics -- from the Napoleonic wars on which Clausewitz based many of his observations

Nevertheless, the Civil War is replete with examples of Clausewitzian principles applied or ignored The writings of the Prussian military philosopher provide a useful framework for analyzing how the two sides pursued that conflict and for identifying factors affecting victories and defeats To examine the entire war through that lens would require volumes, instead, this paper will attempt to consider several questions on the scale of a single engagement, the battle of Fredericksburg Which of Clausewitz's theses were most relevant to that campaign? Which commanders reflected, understood, applied those principles more? What role did this play in the outcome? Could a different application of Clausewitz's lessons have affected the results of the battle? Do aspects of Fredericksburg *contradict* the Prussian's teachings? Examination of these questions demonstrates that, while the Fredericksburg campaign illustrates many of Clausewitz's theses, *fog, friction* and *military genius* best explain how a promising Union initiative ended in disaster

If any Clausewitzian dictum has achieved sound-bite status, it is his observation that "war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means."[1] This bedrock tenet of Clausewitz's analysis helps explain the respective actions of the Union and the Confederacy following the ambiguous Union "victory" at Antietam, the major battle that preceded Fredericksburg. Clausewitz's much-quoted remark is a pithy reminder that warfare can be accurately understood only *"in the light of political factors and conditions"* that underlie the conflict and determine its war objectives.[2] Clausewitz repeatedly emphasizes the commander's crucial responsibility to focus clearly on the ends for which the war is being waged and to apply the means at his disposal to those goals. "A prince or general can best show his genius," he writes, "by managing a campaign exactly to suit his resources, doing neither too much nor too little."[3]

In Clausewitzian terms, the South was fighting a limited war, in which maintaining Confederate independence was sufficient to constitute success, destruction of the adversary was but one possible route to that goal, and a difficult one at that. Recognizing the need to measure his post-Antietam means against his government's ends, General Lee set aside (temporarily) his plan of carrying the war to the North, which he hoped would break the Union's will to fight on, and instead retreated into Virginia to rebuild his army. For his part, President Lincoln took advantage of the (relative) success at Antietam to raise the stakes in the conflict, hoping thereby to tip the balance in the Union's favor. The issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation changed the North's war aims, opening the way for something closer to Clausewitz's "absolute" war, which

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[1]Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 69.

[2]Ibid., 607.

[3]Ibid., 177.

eliminates the possibility of the opponent's continued political independence [4] Return to the *status quo ante* was no longer an option, the economic basis of the pre-war way of life in the South was to be destroyed In issuing the Proclamation, Lincoln provided one of the Civil War's clearest examples of the interaction between political context and military action that Clausewitz urges all commanders to recognize

It naturally follows from that interaction that civil-military relations are a subject to which Clausewitz devotes considerable attention One of the Prussian theorist's best-known concepts is the "paradoxical trinity" of the people, the commander and his army, and the government, all three of which are essential to wage war successfully [5] Although Clausewitz cautions against political leaders making ill-informed military judgments,[6] he nevertheless insists that it is the prerogative of those leaders to determine the objectives of a war and the means by which they are pursued [7] President Lincoln needed a general who understood the goals he set and acknowledged his authority to set them, General McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac, was not that man But for one leg of the triad -- the government -- to establish a proper balance with the second leg -- the commander -- it was necessary for the third leg -- the people -- to be consulted, in this case at the ballot box The 1862 congressional elections, in which the Republicans, despite setbacks, maintained their edge over the Democrats, cleared the way for Lincoln to remove the politically well connected McClellan The President named Major General Ambrose Burnside the new commander of the Army of the Potomac

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[4]Michael Howard, *Clausewitz*, Past Masters Series (Oxford Oxford University Press, 1991), 47

[5]Clausewitz 89

[6]Given many of the personalities in the Union and Confederate leaderships, Clausewitz's recommendations to either combine political and military authority in one person, or include the military commander in the cabinet, would likely have created more problems than they solved

[7]Clausewitz, 608

Lincoln's selection is easy to fault in hindsight In fairness to both the President and his new commander, however, it is worth noting that Clausewitz himself was unable to decipher fully the riddle of how one chooses a successful military leader In Book One, Chapter Three of *On War*, Clausewitz discusses at length the qualities that distinguish an exceptional commander Unfortunately, most of those guidelines can be applied only after the fact, once an officer has demonstrated whether he or she possesses those characteristics, since past performance is not a reliable guide to future potential "No case is more common," Clausewitz warns, anticipating the Peter Principle by more than a century, "than that of an officer whose energy declines as he rises in rank and fills positions that are beyond his abilities "[8] Many would assign Burnside to that category In truth, however, the new Union commander displayed a better grasp of certain Clausewitzian principles than he is usually given credit for

Unlike his predecessor, Burnside correctly understood the proper nature of civil-military relations, which Clausewitz identifies as a key factor in the conduct of war Rather than question the President's authority in setting the war's goals, Burnside took to heart -- excessively so, some would later charge -- his own responsibility as commander to fulfill Lincoln's objectives To that end -- and again in contrast with McClellan, who never felt his forces were sufficient -- Burnside adopted a Clausewitzian view of numerical superiority a goal to seek and an advantage to exploit, but not indispensable to victory [9]

Clausewitz assigns only modest value to surprise as a factor in warfare, deeming it a "principle highly attractive in theory, but in practice often held up by the

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[8]Clausewitz 110
[9]Ibid , 197

friction of the whole machine," and therefore very dependent on secrecy and speed [10] Burnside made surprise a key element of his strategy, intending to move fast and steal a march on the Army of Northern Virginia He not only placed Lee in the unfamiliar and uncomfortable position of not knowing where the Union army was headed, but even managed to get advance elements of his army to the Rappahannock before the Confederate commander was certain of their destination [11] For his part, Lee would have preferred to take a stand on the North Anna River, which he considered more defensible, but Burnside, by moving quickly, had exercised the initiative in determining where the engagement would occur, an approach Clausewitz commends

Despite this promising start, however, Fredericksburg turned into a debacle for the Union, for reasons Clausewitzian theses can help explain The Prussian theorist emphasizes the importance of identifying the enemy's center of gravity, "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends "[12] "That is point against which all our energies should be directed," he declares, further noting that "no matter what the central feature of the enemy's power may be the defeat and destruction of his fighting force remains the best way to begin "[13] By his own admission, Burnside did *not* focus on the Confederate center of gravity He made the capture of Richmond his target, because, as he wrote, 'the fall of that place would tend more to cripple the Rebel cause than almost any other military event, *except the absolute breaking up of their army* [emphasis

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[10]Clausewitz, 198

[11]Edward J Stackpole, *The Fredericksburg Campaign* (Harrisburg, Pa Stackpole Books, 1991), 80 Stackpole writes that Lee made skillful use of information, and was 'caught flat-footed" because ' [f]or once his excellent intelligence system had failed to keep up " It is unlikely that Lee would subscribe to Clausewitz's dismissive view of the value of intelligence in warfare

[12]Clausewitz, 595-596

[13]Ibid , 596

added] "[14] Admittedly, in pursuing this Richmond-centric strategy, the Union commander did no more than reflect the priorities of many in Washington -- though not, significantly, Lincoln himself, who in a detailed October 13, 1862 letter to McClellan identified beating the enemy as no less important than beating him to the Confederate capital [15] Not for the first time, the Union commander-in-chief demonstrated a more sophisticated perspective on enemy centers of gravity than did his generals

One of the most important dialectics in *On War* is Clausewitz's analysis of the characteristics and merits of the offensive vs the defensive approach, he would have found much to support his theses in the Fredericksburg campaign The principle factors that provide decisive advantages, Clausewitz writes, are "*surprise, the benefit of terrain, and concentric attack* " the first and last of which predominantly, and the middle exclusively, favor the defender [16] For these and other reasons, Clausewitz avers that ' *defense is a stronger form of war than attack* "[17] All the same, he notes that it would "contradict the very idea of war to regard defense as its final purpose," because defense 'has a negative object" and "should be used only so long as weakness compels, and be abandoned as soon as we are strong enough to pursue a positive object," i e , take the offensive [18]

Both Lee, in attempting to carry the war to the North, and Burnside, in striving to take Richmond with a blow too swift to parry, had shown themselves willing to "pursue a positive object " The Southerner, however, displayed greater respect for the superior

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[14]Stackpole, 289
[15]Ibid 23-28
[16]Clausewitz, 360
[17]Ibid , 366
[18]Ibid 358

power of defense He tried to gain President Davis's permission to withdraw to what he considered a more defensible position [19] Failing that, Lee exploited defensive features around Fredericksburg, with General Jackson's forces digging entrenchments to prevent a Union fording south of town and General Longstreet's forces occupying the ridge of Marye's Heights west of town

Of the "decisive advantages" identified by Clausewitz, terrain worked lopsidedly against an assault by the Federals, and Burnside rejected a proposal by General Sumner to mount a concentric attack by crossing the Rappahannock downstream [20] The principle advantage that Burnside's plan had initially possessed -- surprise -- had also been lost, for reasons that go to the heart of Clausewitz's thinking on war

'Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult "[21] Probably no other concepts from Clausewitz lodge themselves more firmly in the reader's mind than *fog* and *friction*, so insightful in formulation and so widespread in applicability No other concepts do more to explain why the battle of Fredericksburg developed as it did

Friction undid Burnside's plan Its strength was its boldness, but its weakness, as observers from Lincoln on down noted,[22] was its dependence on swift, efficient movement at every stage For the plan to succeed, Union forces had to get across the Rappahannock before the Confederates made it to Fredericksburg, if they did so, they could race to Richmond before the Army of Northern Virginia managed to respond However, through a combination of slipshod delegation, misunderstanding, and bad

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[19]William Marvel and Donald Pfanz, *The Battle of Fredericksburg*, National Park Civil War Series (Eastern National, 1997), 6

[20]Ibid , 7

[21]Clausewitz, 119

[22] "The President has just assented to your plan He thinks it will succeed if you move rapidly, *otherwise not* [emphasis added] " Gen Halleck to Gen Burnside, November 14, 1862 Stackpole, 69

weather -- in a word, friction, -- the pontoons on which Burnside relied for that crossing reached the river ten days after his troops did During that fatal delay, the Confederate armies hastily summoned by Lee arrived in Fredericksburg Union commanders and troops watched as the forces ranged against them on the opposite bank grew and dug in, and the morale of the Federal army sank -- an additional blow, in the eyes of Clausewitz, who attached great importance to an army's fighting spirit By the same token, the Confederates occupying the superior defensive ground on Marye's Heights could scarcely believe the Union forces would present such easy targets, and morale in the Army of Northern Virginia rose

Fog also played a crucial role at Fredericksburg Literal fog provided temporary cover to the Union engineers laying pontoons across the Rappahannock -- until wind and sun cleared the mists away and left them mortally exposed to Confederate sharpshooters More significant, however, was metaphorical fog Lee, to his dismay, was initially uncertain of where Burnside was taking the Army of the Potomac [23] He was able to overcome that ambiguity in part thanks to his exceptional Clausewitzian *coup d'oeil*, that quality that enables a commander to transcend incomplete or contradictory information and penetrate to the essence of a situation

Fog was greater problem, however, for the Union commander Uncertainty as to where the pontoons were, and when they would arrive, kept Burnside within sight of, yet tantalizingly apart from, his objective Had he known his army would be stalled there for

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[23] A problem Burnside's predecessor apparently did not pose him Lee expressed regret at McClellan's removal, because as he mordantly noted '[w]e always understood each other so well I fear they may continue to make these changes until they find someone whom I don't understand " Shelby Foote *The Civil War A Narrative From Fort Sumter to Perryville* (New York Vintage Books, 1986), 781

ten squandered days, he might have accepted General Sumner's November 17 proposal to ford the Rappahannock at Falmouth and capture the then lightly defended Fredericksburg [24] Once the actual offensive was underway, on December 13, Burnside's imprecisely worded orders and General Franklin's poor knowledge of the local geography caused a potentially key Union assault to miss a vulnerable point in the Confederate lines [25]

Fog and friction, Clausewitz warns, are inevitable in war Some commanders, however overcome them, thanks to "*a harmonious combination of elements*" that the Prussian theorist groups under the rubric *military genius* [26] In this regard, the two commanders at Fredericksburg were drastically mismatched Although in recent years some scholars have questioned whether the image of Lee as a military genius might in some respects be too lofty, Burnside's reputation in history needs no bringing down to earth In fact, the Union general possessed a number of the qualities Clausewitz ascribed to superior commanders energy, staunchness, self-control But military genius resides in a *balance* of essential characteristics, and while determination is admirable in a general, "[o]bstinacy " Clausewitz writes, "*is a fault of temperament* "[27] To grasp the distinction between the two qualities, one need only compare General Grant, who, finding one approach after another unsuccessful at Vicksburg, continued to experiment until he produced the tool to crack that nut, with Burnside, who could see no way out of the box he found himself in than to charge head on, against the better judgment of his senior officers, into a stone wall defended by a rain of fire Burnside's charge, of course, was

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[24]Marvel and Pfalz, 4
[25]Ibid , 23
[26]Clausewitz, 100
[27]Ibid , 108

metaphorical. the actual charging was done by the nearly 13,000 Union dead at Fredericksburg, more than sixty percent of whom died in the assault on the stone wall that not one of them reached [28]

Clausewitz did not claim that his theses offered infallible guidance on the conduct of warfare Quite the opposite, he urged readers to approach all "rules ' of military theory with a healthy skepticism. Nevertheless, the battle of Fredericksburg demonstrates the truth in a number of his precepts, which a commander would do better to heed than to ignore And if Lee displayed the better intuitive sense of Clausewitzian thinking than did Burnside. his instincts were not flawless Clausewitz advises that "[o]nce a defender has gained an important advantage he must strike back, or he will court destruction "[29] Furthermore, "the complete or partial destruction of the enemy must be regarded as the sole object of all engagements "[30] Lee, however, did not press his advantage against the battered Army of the Potomac, which slipped across the river under cover of darkness and lived to fight -- fight *him* -- another day

Though Lee was victorious at Fredericksburg, the fog and friction he surmounted along the Rappahannock would exact its toll on the Confederates at Gettysburg eight months later To give Clausewitz the last word "In war the result is never final "[31]

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[28]Marvel and Pfalz 52
[29]Clausewitz, 370
[30]Ibid , 227
[31]Ibid , 80

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